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ABSTRACT

Recent research in persuasion shows that while message recipients often use little cognitive effort when assessing message validity, they may instead rely on a heuristic processing strategy. This study used a priming-like paradigm to manipulate the reliability that subjects apply to the heuristic "message length implies message strength." Subjects were pretested in class to assess their level of need for cognition. In the first study, the priming phase, subjects were asked to rate a set of statements to assess the goodness of certain rules of thumb. Under high association, subjects rated statements that showed a strong relationship between number and quality of arguments. Under low association, subjects rated statements that showed no relationship between argument quality and number. In the second study, the persuasion phase, a second experimenter asked students to generate a physical description of a speaker based on hearing the person's voice. The tape of the voice contained a persuasive message advocating comprehensive exams as a requirement for graduation. The number of arguments supporting the exam requirement was varied for subjects. Subjects judged to be low in need for cognition who received the relevant heuristic as reliable were most influenced by a purportedly longer versus a shorter message. For low need-for-cognition subjects, estimated number of arguments significantly predicted attitude under high association, but for high need-for-cognition subjects, issue-related thoughts were most predictive of attitude. The results provide further evidence for the heuristic model of persuasion. (ABL)

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Evidence for Heuristic Processing of Persuasive

Messages: A Priming Approach

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ABSTRACT

Previous research has shown the utility of distinguishing between systematic and heuristic processing in persuasion. However, little direct evidence has specified the cognitive mediation of heuristic processing. In the present study, a priming paradigm was used to manipulate the perceived reliability that recipients attributed to the heuristic, "message length implies message strength". Subjects were then exposed to an audiotaped message in which the purported number of arguments was varied (9 vs. 3 vs. No Mention). Subjects were also divided into High and Low "Need for Cognition" (NFC) groups based on pretesting. The results indicated that subjects were most influenced by the nine arguments message, but only when the relevant heuristic was perceived as reliable and when subjects were Low in NFC.

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INTRODUCTION

Recent work in persuasion indicates that message recipients often use little cognitive effort when assessing message validity and instead may rely on a heuristic processing strategy (cf. Chaiken, 1980; Chaiken, in press). Heuristic processing generally involves using simple decision rules that may be elicited by persuasive cues not inherently present in the argumentation of a message (e.g., recipients may base their assessment of a message on structural characteristics such as length or number of arguments).

While existing research (e.g., Chaiken, 1980; see Eagly & Chaiken, 1984, and Chaiken, in press for reviews) has supported the existence of heuristics in persuasion, to date only indirect evidence for the cognitive mediation of heuristic processing exists. For example, Chaiken and Eagly (1983) and Pallak (1983) have found that heightening the salience of "heuristic" cues increases the likelihood that recipients will use simple decision rules in evaluating message validity.

To provide more direct evidence for the heuristic model, the present study used a priming-like paradigm to manipulate the reliability that subjects attributed to the heuristic, "message length implies message strength". If priming increases the accessibility of this heuristic, then subjects who are primed to believe that longer (vs. shorter) messages are better should be more likely to rely on a message length heuristic than subjects who are primed to believe that no relationship between message length and message quality exists.

Subjects were also classified according to their level of "Need for Cognition" (NFC; Cacioppo & Petty, 1982). Cacioppo, Petty, and Morris (1983) have shown that high (vs. low) NFC subjects are more likely to engage in

"systematic processing" (attending to, and cognitively elaborating on the argumentation in a message). Recent research in our laboratory (Chaiken, Axson, Hicks, Yates, & Wilson, 1985; see Chaiken, in press for a discussion) has focused on investigating whether low (vs. high) NFC individuals may rely on simple decision rules in evaluating message validity. If individuals who are low in NFC lack the ability or motivation to systematically process information, they may not gain access to message- and issue-relevant information that might serve to contradict the validity of a simple heuristic (e.g., length implies strength). It was therefore hypothesized that low (vs. high) NFC subjects would be more likely to rely on a simple decision rule, especially when primed to do so.

METHOD

Subjects were given a pretest in class to assess their level of Need for Cognition. Several weeks later, they attended an experimental session described as "two unrelated studies".

In "study one" (priming phase), subjects were asked to rate a set of statements to assess the "goodness" of "certain rules of thumb" such as "more is better". Under High Association (high reliability), subjects rated statements that showed a strong relationship between the number and quality of arguments (e.g., each statement set contained either many arguments, all high in quality or very few arguments, all low in quality, where quality was determined by pilot testing). Under Low Association (low reliability), subjects rated statements that showed no relationship between argument quality and number.

In "study two" (persuasion phase), a second experimenter presented a different cover story to the subjects. They were asked to generate a physical

description of a speaker based just on hearing the person's voice. Subjects listened to a tape that contained a persuasive message that advocated comprehensive exams as a requirement for graduation. The purported number of arguments was varied such that subjects were exposed to an identical message except that the speaker stated that there were 9 (vs. 3) supportive arguments or didn't mention the number of arguments contained in the message. Afterward, subjects indicated their opinion toward implementing comprehensive exams and completed other measures.

RESULTS

The major hypothesis was that reliance on the length-strength heuristic would be greater under high (vs. low) association, and that this effect would be most evident for low (vs. high) NFC subjects. As predicted, planned comparisons revealed that low NFC subjects in the "nine argument"-high association condition were more in favor of comprehensive exams than low NFC subjects in the remaining conditions ($t = 1.99$, $p < .05$). Subjects who were high in NFC did not show this effect ($t < 1$).

A series of multiple regressions was performed to further explore the cognitive mediation of the above opinion effects. Opinion toward comprehensive exams served as the criterion variable, while predictor variables were the estimated number of arguments contained in the speech, the difference in positive versus negative issue-related thoughts, and the difference in positive versus negative communicator-related thoughts (derived from responses to a thought-listing task). Subjects who are employing a length-strength heuristic should be more likely to use estimated number of arguments to determine their attitude, while subjects who engage in systematic processing might be expected to rely more on issue-related thoughts in forming their opinions. The results of these analyses are depicted in Table 1.

Consistent with our hypotheses, for low NFC subjects under high association, estimated number of arguments significantly predicted their attitude toward comprehensive exams. The greater the number of estimated arguments the more low NFC, high association subjects favored the use of comprehensive exams. For high NFC subjects, regardless of association, positive minus negative issue-related thoughts reliably predicted their attitude toward comprehensive exams. The greater the number of positive (vs. negative) issue-related thoughts, the more high NFC subjects favored the use of comprehensive exams.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings in this experiment suggest support for our hypotheses. In this study, the reliability of a message length heuristic was directly manipulated. Subjects who perceived the relevant heuristic as reliable were most influenced by a purportedly longer (vs. shorter) message. However, this effect was only found for subjects who were low in Need for Cognition. Regression analyses provided further support for the hypotheses. For low NFC subjects, estimated number of arguments significantly predicted attitude (under high association), but, for high NFC subjects, issue-related thoughts were most predictive of attitude. In sum, the results provide further evidence for the heuristic model of persuasion.

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Table 1. Multiple regressions predicting attitude from estimated number of arguments, positive minus negative issue-related thoughts, and positive minus negative communicator-related thoughts.

<u>Predictors</u>	<u>Conditions</u>			
	<u>High NFC</u> <u>High Assoc</u>	<u>High NFC</u> <u>Low Assoc</u>	<u>Low NFC</u> <u>High Assoc</u>	<u>Low NFC</u> <u>Low Assoc</u>
Pos - Neg thoughts about communicator	-.08	.06	.08	-.15
Pos - Neg thoughts about issue	.29*	.41**	.06	.28a
Estimated number of arguments	.02	.21	.28*	-.15

Note. Numbers represent Bs. Residual degrees of freedom for High NFC-High Assoc, High NFC-Low Assoc, Low NFC-High Assoc, and Low NFC-Low Assoc are 48, 53, 51, and 48, respectively.

a $p < .06$

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$